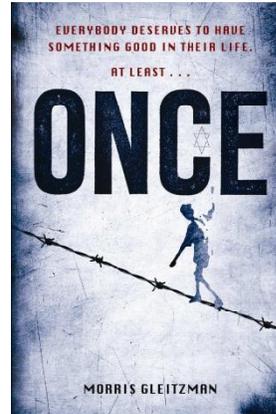


Discussion Guide

Once by Morris Gleitzman

Grade Level:
7th grade and up

Once is a novel by Morris Gleitzman, set during World War II. It is followed by *Then* and *Now*. Discussion guides are available for each title, available from Henry Holt Books for Young Readers. Note that this guide contains references to plot lines that may spoil the first reading of this book.



by Morris Gleitzman

Ages 12 and up

Hardcover ISBN-13: 978-0-8050-9026-0

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Introduction:

Once I was living in an orphanage in the mountains and I shouldn't have been and I almost caused a riot. It was because of the carrot.

So begins the story of ten-year-old Felix, a Jewish boy in Poland in 1942, hiding from the Nazis in a Catholic orphanage. The only problem is that he doesn't know anything about the war; he believes he's in the orphanage only while his parents travel and try to salvage their bookselling business. And when he thinks his parents are in danger, Felix sets off to warn them—straight into the heart of Nazi-occupied Poland.

To Felix, everything is a story: Why did he get a whole carrot in his soup? It must be a sign that his parents are coming to get him. Why are the Nazis burning books? They must be foreign librarians sent to clean up the orphanage's outdated library. But as Felix's journey gets increasingly dangerous, he begins to see horrors that not even stories can explain.

Despite his grim surroundings, Felix never loses hope. Morris Gleitzman takes a painful subject and expertly turns it into a story filled with love, friendship, and even humor.

Discussion Questions:

Chapter 1 (page 1)

"Once I was living in an orphanage in the mountains and I shouldn't have been and I almost caused a riot."

1. Describe your first impressions of Felix, Mother Minka, and one other character introduced in the opening chapter. Consider the traits they appear to possess and your response to meeting them.
2. What is the significance of the carrot, and what are Felix's plans for it?

Chapter 2 (page 9)

"Once I stayed awake all night, waiting for Mum and Dad to arrive."

1. What memories and physical evidence does Felix have of his parents? What beliefs does Felix have about them? What beliefs does he hold about what happened?

2. Explain the importance of Felix's notebook. Identify four things this notebook symbolizes.

Chapter 3 (page 18)

"Once I saw a customer, years ago, damaging books in Mum and Dad's shop. Tearing pages out. Screwing them up. Shouting things I couldn't understand."

1. Identify two things that unsettle Felix and explain how his thinking starts to change.
2. Felix has plans to help his mother and father. What are they, and what motivates him to take action?

Chapter 4 (page 29)

"Once I escaped from an orphanage in the mountains and I didn't have to do any of the things you do in escape stories."

1. List some of the reasons Felix considers himself lucky. List things you think he could complain about.
2. What indications are there—recognized or missed by Felix—that something is terribly wrong? What explanations does Felix come up with to make sense of things?

Chapter 5 (page 41)

"Once I walked all night and all the next day except for a short sleep in a forest and all night again and then I was home."

1. Contrast Felix's dreams with the reality of what he discovers when he makes it home.
2. Describe the range of emotions he experiences. Analyze emotions he observes in other people encountered at this point in the story. How would you classify them?

Chapter 6 (page 53)

"Once I walked as fast as I could towards the city to find Mum and Dad and I didn't let anything stop me. Not until the fire."

1. What changes have taken place in and how do they influence his actions?
2. How does Felix control his anxiety and make use of his storytelling ability?

Chapter 7 (page 62)

"Once I woke up and I was at home in bed. Dad was reading me a story about a boy who got left in an orphanage. Mum came in with some carrot soup. They both promised they'd never leave me anywhere. We hugged and hugged."

1. What is the significance of the armbands? What do Felix's predictions about the future signify?

2. How does Felix answer his own question, “Why would the Nazis make people suffer like this just for the sake of some books?” (page 70) Why is this the turning point?

Chapter 8 (page 72)

“Once I spent about six hours telling stories to Zelda, to keep her spirits up, to keep my spirits up, to keep our legs moving as we trudged through the rain toward the city.”

1. Why does Felix go from six hours of storytelling in order to keep Zelda’s spirits up to the point where he suddenly hasn’t got any more stories (page 80)?
2. Describe the toll such a journey takes on Felix and Zelda, physically and emotionally. How do they manage to survive?

Chapter 9 (page 81)

“Once I lay in the street in tears, because the Nazis are everywhere and no grown-ups can protect kids from them, not Mum and Dad, not Mother Minka, not Father Ludwik, not God, not Jesus, not the Virgin Mary, not the Pope, not Adolf Hitler.”

1. Explain what Barney is doing. What sort of person do you think he is? What does he represent?
2. What impact does the realization that no one can protect the children have on Felix? How does this affect his belief in the power of stories?

Chapter 10 (page 91)

“Once I was living in a cellar in a Nazi city with seven other kids when I shouldn’t have been.”

1. Use an example of Felix’s behavior or “self-talk” to illustrate his unusual degree of maturity and self-awareness. Explain your reasoning.
2. What story “saved his life,” and what connections does he finally make?

Chapter 11 (page 99)

“Once I escaped from an underground hiding place by telling a story. It was a bit exaggerated. It was a bit fanciful. It was my imagination getting a bit carried away.”

1. What lengths does Felix go to when trying to “escape”? How does Barney handle it?
2. What does Felix discover about Barney, and how does Barney enlist Felix’s help?

Chapter 12 (page 112)

“Once a dentist stopped me from asking a Nazi officer about my parents and I was really mad at him.”

1. Why did Barney stop Felix from asking about his parents? Why do he and Felix decide that Zelda needs to know the truth?

2. Describe the range of reactions the children are showing as result of the traumas each has suffered. How do you feel about the stories shared by the children?

Chapter 13 (page 121)

“Once I told Zelda a story that made her cry, so I lay on her sack with her for hours and hours until she fell asleep.”

1. Analyze Barney’s gesture of giving Felix new boots. What does he mean by what he says to Felix on page 122? What other “good things” does Felix seem to think he’s got, and what can you see in him that is good (e.g., his hope and optimism)?
2. Felix makes a terrible discovery in the chapter and Barney is forced to tell him some awful truths about what is going on. What is Felix torn between as he tries to take it all in?

Chapter 14 (page 132)

“Once I loved stories and now I hate them.”

1. Describe Felix’s state of mind as this chapter opens. Describe your own feelings as you read about his close shaves and what he discovers upon returning to his hideout.
2. The importance of books is emphasized in this chapter. Felix’s favorite gets him into terrible danger, but other books save him. What do books symbolize and mean for Felix?

Chapter 15 (page 144)

“Once the Nazis found our cellar. They dragged us all out and made us walk through the ghetto while they pointed guns at us.”

1. Barney and Zelda wouldn’t go. Why not? Think of three more reasons.
2. What is important to Felix as they head to the railway station? What is important to the others as they are tossed aboard the train?

Chapter 16 (page 153)

“Once I went on my first train journey, but I wouldn’t call it exciting—I’d call it painful and miserable.”

1. Once again, a book becomes a savior of sorts. Explain how. What is the significance of the fact that Felix is willing to use—and virtually lose—his notebook?
2. What choice and possible outcomes does the hole in the carriage create for the people inside?

Chapter 17 (page 162)

“Once I lay in a field somewhere in Poland, not sure if I was alive or dead.”

ONCE

1. Felix feels fortunate: “However my story turns out, I’ll never forget how lucky I am” (page 163). What is your explanation for this?
2. Knowing Felix as you do by the end of the novel, how do you think his story might continue to unfold?

Teachers’ notes written by Andrea Blake

About the Author:



Morris Gleitzman has been a frozen-chicken defroster, fashion-industry trainee, department-store Santa, sugar-mill employee, and screenwriter, among other things. Now he’s one of Australia’s best-loved children’s book authors. His books have been published all over the world. You can visit him at www.morrisgleitzman.com.

Once

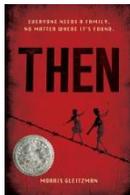
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Also Available from Morris Gleitzman:



Then

Ages 12 and up

Hardcover ISBN-13: 978-0-8050-9027-7

Paperback ISBN-13: 978-01-250-00341-6 (available in May 2013)

Discussion guide available



Now

Ages 12 and up

Hardcover ISBN-13: 978-0-8050-9378-0

Paperback ISBN-13: 978-1-250-03417-5 (available November 2013)

Discussion guide available

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